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UNDER HEAVY MILITARY PRESENCE AND SURVEILLANCE DRONES, 2,000 TAMILS GATHERED IN MULLAITIVU, SRI LANKA ON MAY 18 ON WHAT THEY CALL GENOCIDE DAY, TO REMEMBER THEIR LOVED ONES THAT WERE AMONG THE TENS OF THOUSANDS WHO DISAPPEARED DURING A BRUTAL CIVIL WAR.

VICE News

Why These Women Aren't Joining Sri Lanka's Massive Anti-Government Protests

"Their struggles are not the same as ours."

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25 May, 2022, 4:38pm

shelling. Or how she walked over a sea of dead bodies and bombed homes, while she was pregnant with her.

When Sri Lanka's bloody 27-year war ended in 2009, Ranjanidevi, a Tamil ethnic minority in a Sinhala Buddhist-majority country, survived with a baby, a missing husband, two missing brothers, and lasting trauma.

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"My daughter grew up never knowing who her father was, or her uncles," Ranjanidevi told VICE World News.

Ranjanidevi's daughter is now 13. Until she was 9, Ranjanidevi would tell her that her father was in a military camp. But 44-year-old Ranjanidevi, who lives in the northern Sri Lankan coastal district of Mullaitivu, has no idea where he actually is. Like tens of thousands of Tamil men, her husband disappeared in the war.

"Despite everything I have been through, I want my loved ones back. I will never stop looking for them," she said.

Over the last two months, tens of thousands of Sri Lankans – crushed by massive shortages of fuel, food

together to protest. Specifically, protesters blame the powerful and wealthy Rajapaksa family, who've mostly ruled the country since the end of the civil war.
The scale of the protest is unprecedented, and its doggedness has managed to shake up the Rajapaksa-led government. But Sri Lanka's Tamils, the country's most persecuted community, are visibly absent from the protests.

Sri Lanka Try to Storm President's Mansion

PALLAVI PUNDIR

04.01.22

Even though the country's 3 million Tamils have every reason to protest. The economic crisis has hit them harder. Many of them largely blame the Rajapaksas for the hundreds of thousands of Tamils who lost their lives or "disappeared" during the country's civil war, and the continued surveillance, intimidation and racism Tamils face in Sri Lanka.

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RANJANIDEVI HOLDS PHOTOS OF HER HUSBAND (MIDDLE) AND HER TWO BROTHERS WHO WENT MISSING DURING THE FAG END OF THE CIVIL WAR.

As protesters in the capital Colombo faced water cannons, tear gas and violence from pro-government factions, VICE World News travelled to Mullaitivu, one of the many districts in north and east Sri Lanka – where Tamils live under heavy military presence and surveillance – to understand why they weren't joining the mass protests calling for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down.

"Their struggles are not the same as ours," said Ranjanidevi. "What they want is economic relief, while we want that but also something more valuable: human lives."

Ranjanidevi isn't joining the mass anti-government rallies, but she has in fact been protesting for years for her loved ones.

Protesting Tamils like her are rare. Ranjanidevi and more than a thousand other Tamil women – whose sons, husbands, brothers and fathers have gone missing in what they believe to be enforced

News

I Was Tortured in Sri Lanka for Harboring Tamils

movement has gained traction globally over the years, even if it is mostly unheard of in Colombo.

In her now decade-long quest to find her family, Ranjanidevi has been subjected to intimidation and threats from the military. Phone calls from military officials and frequent summons to military stations are a constant in this part of Sri Lanka for journalists, families of the disappeared, and even ordinary Tamil citizens. Protesting mothers and wives like her have faced arrests, abuse and attacks too.

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TAMIL WOMEN WHO PROTEST TO FIND THE DISAPPEARED ARRIVE AT THE MULLIVAIKKAL TOWN'S GENOCIDE DAY MEMORIAL ON MAY 18. POLICE OFFICIALS ARE SEEN STANDING AT A DISTANCE.

Their lives are a sharp contrast to the hundreds of protesters who continue to gather at Colombo's scenic Galle Face Green where speeches echo from loudspeakers; songs of resistance reverberate; and a crowd holds up banners saying, "Let's expel the government" and "Power to the people." Some posters liken Gotabaya to Hitler. Another says, "Gota and his dumbass family, ya'll should go fuck yourselves."

Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the current president of Sri Lanka, is the strongman of the country's most powerful political dynasty. On an island with a history of Sinhalese nationalism, the Rajapaksas have earned a reputation for extreme wealth, corruption and racism, especially towards Tamils.

government crushed the Tamil separatist group called Tamil Tigers to end the civil war in 2009, gaining the brothers further popularity. The war made heroes out of the Rajapaksas, but ethnic Tamils call it a genocide.

SCENES AT COLOMBO'S GALLE FACE GREEN SHOWS PEOPLE COMING OUT ON THE STREETS AND DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY FROM THEIR POLITICAL ELITE. PHOTOS: PALLAVI PUNDIR

Many independent reports point out grave human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan military after the war, but successive governments have avoided investigations into alleged war crimes.

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told VICE World News. "I've never seen anything like this before, where everybody is trying to put a united front."

But a Tamil lawyer who provides legal assistance to anti-government protesters felt differently.

"I see some discussions on social media," Swastika Arulingam told VICE World News. "But on the ground, there's no discussion on what happened to the Tamils, and why it's important to include them in the conversations." She said that protesters are mostly Sinhalese.

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Sri Lanka's Ruling Family Is in Hiding Amid Protests That Killed 5 and Burnt 52 Mansions

PALLAVI PUNDIR

05.10.22

"Nobody would deny that this is a historic moment," Anushani Alagarajah, a Tamil civil rights activist based in the city of Jaffna, told VICE World News. "But Tamil people have been sceptical [about it] from day one, because we haven't really seen this scale of support when protests were happening here."

As one drives away from Colombo and towards the north, the bustle of the protest rallies dies down.

In Mullaitivu, home to some 90,000 Tamils, the streets are mostly empty, although the air is tense.

There are no banners criticising the government. No rallies openly calling for the Rajapaksa family to step down. The economic crisis is worse here, with many families able to eat only one meal a day, but they say they've been used to hunger for years.

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When VICE World News visited the district last week, it was just before the Tamils' commemoration of Genocide Day on May 18, when they remember the Tamil Tigers, who once ran a parallel state for Tamils in the north and east of the country, and are now designated as a terrorist group banned by countries including the U.S., UK, Australia and India.

This same day is "celebrated" by the Rajapaksa government as Victory Day or National War Heroes Day. While heroes were celebrated in Colombo, a sombre scene unfolded on May 18 in Mullivaikkal town. Although memorial events for the Tamils are generally prohibited, mostly by force and intimidation, even the Sri Lankan military makes a cautioned exception on this date.

UNDER HEAVY MILITARY SURVEILLANCE, TAMILS CRIED AS THEY MOURNED THEIR DISAPPEARED LOVED ONES AT THE GENOCIDE DAY MEMORIAL ON MAY 18.

Rows and rows of Tamil mothers, sisters, fathers and brothers wailed as they lit flames to remember their loved ones on Mullivaikkal beach in a rite of communal mourning. Their loved ones were among the tens of thousands of Tamils who were trapped on this 3-square-kilometre area on May 18, 2009 and killed during the last offensive by the Sri Lankan military against the Tamil Tigers.

TAMILS LINE UP TO MOURN WITH A PLANT TO REPRESENT THEIR DISAPPEARED LOVED ONES AT THE GENOCIDE DAY MEMORIAL IN MULLIVAIKKAL ON MAY 18.

The defiant memorial was heartbreaking but short-lived, under the watchful buzz of drones overhead. Dozens of police and military personnel surrounded some 2,000 mourners whose cries mixed with Tamil songs echoing from loudspeakers.

In the past, journalists, local politicians and ordinary people have been targeted for being at the memorial. Last year, a genocide memorial statue in another town was desecrated and destroyed by a government-run university.

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HEARTBREAKING SCENES OF MOURNING UNFOLD IN MULLIVAIKKAL ON MAY 18.

Military presence near protest sites is becoming the norm in Colombo, but it has long been a constant reality in Tamil-populated towns as evidenced by the multiple checkpoints one has to stop at to enter Mullivaikkal. Despite being Sri Lanka's least populated district, there's one soldier for every two civilians here. A study by Tamil rights organisations claims that in Sri Lanka, one of the world's most militarised countries, Mullaitivu has the largest military presence.

Political analysts blame the Rajapaksa government's "bloated" militarisation budget as a major contributor to the economic crisis. World Bank data show Sri Lankan military expenditure reached $1.57 billion in 2020, and there's a proposal to increase the allocation by 15 percent this year. Gotabaya has filled his cabinet with military commanders, and pardoned war criminals convicted of killing Tamils.

Mario Arulthas, who works as an advisor to U.S.-based Tamil rights non-profit People For Equality and Relief in Lanka, says the suppression has

a "Sinhalization" of Tamil-majority areas with an aim of erasure.

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"If you look at the risks Tamil people take and despite that, the actions they take, particularly using words like 'genocide' and accusing members of the ruling family, this can't be compared to what's happening in Colombo," said Arulthas. "Of all the bad things the Rajapaksas have done, the worst of it all is what they did to the Tamils."

Alagarajah, who grew up during the civil war amid heavy military presence, said that militarisation has a deep psychological impact.

"People here have been living with the same military that killed their family, made them disappear, or are living on their lands," she said. "One doesn't need to be beaten up or tear gassed for it to become violence. The fact that life here is changing the psyche of the people and the way we function as a community, that in itself is violence."

A MOTHER OF THE DISAPPEARED, WEARING A SYMBOLIC BLACK SARI AND HEAD BAND, OFFERS FLOWERS AT THE GENOCIDE DAY MEMORIAL. SIMILAR MEMORIALS HAVE BEEN TARGETED BY THE STATE OFFICIALS IN THE PAST.

Ranjana Prabhakaran, a 55-year-old mother who has been looking for her son since 2008, said that she's been offered money, jobs and property by military officials to let go of the case. "I've been told that they will shoot me if I don't give up," she told VICE World News.

In 2020, Gotabaya, who has a history of denying the disappearances, said that the disappeared are actually dead, and started issuing death certificates to whomever was searching for them. Prabhakaran said that she doesn't believe her son, who would be 31 today, is dead. "I know he is still out there. I expect him to come home."

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resources," said Prabhakaran, shrugging off the current crisis as but one in a long list Tamils have endured. "We can do it again."

RANJANA PRABHAKARAN LOST HER SON, THEN 17, IN 2008 DURING THE CIVIL WAR. SHE CLAIMS HE WAS TAKEN BY THE MILITARY OFFICIALS, AND SHE NEVER SAW HIM AGAIN.

But Alagarajah said that despite a strong show of resilience, Tamils are facing the repercussions of the economic crisis more than the rest of the country. "Families eat once a day, and there's not much economic development here since the war, so jobs are few," she said. "We don't even know how much the economic crisis has already affected people here."

Thusian Nandakumar, a diaspora Tamil doctor and journalist based in the U.K., said that the anti-government protests can't just be driven by hopes of fixing the economy and for Gotabaya to step down. "The problems of Sri Lanka stretch beyond just the Rajapaksas and go to the deep systemic problems that have existed for a long time," he told VICE World News.

Genocide Day, which is a rarity. But words like "Tamil," "war crimes" and "genocide" were not spoken.

"It's easy to say we're all united without actually speaking to those voices," said Nandakumar. "That is a position of privilege and power. We need more than this."

For Tamils like Ranjanidevi, accountability must come from those directly in positions of power: the Rajapaksas. "We handed our loved ones over to Mahinda and Gotabaya. These are the people who have to answer to us."

Follow Pallavi Pundir on Twitter.

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